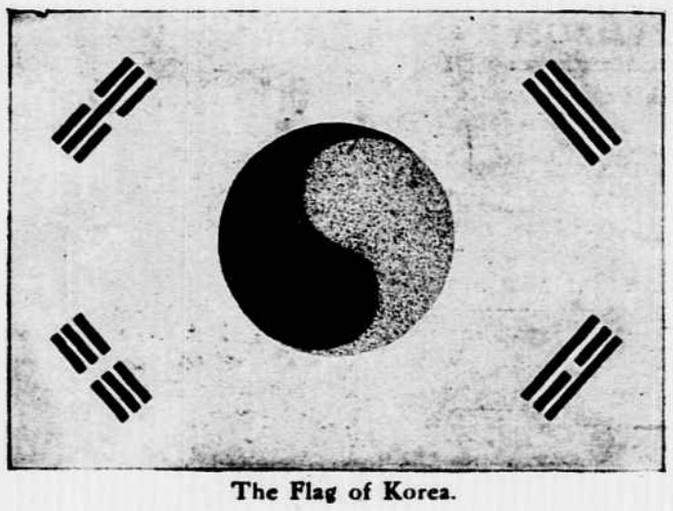
WHAT'S IN A CUP OF TEA

By William Elliot Griffis



The Flag of Korea.

WHAT do Americans see in a cup of tea more than refreshment and five o'clock chat? Or, perhaps in the leaf dregs, their "fortunes"?

To the Chinese and Koreans the beginnings of the universe reappear in miniature when they rotate the last of the liquid, before draining the cup. Against these symbols of quiet and motion, in white ceramics and amber brown liquid, they behold the initial cosmic forces, positive and negative, at work in the making of worlds. Behold on the flag of Korea this emblem! What seems to be two commas in perpetual revolution, each striving to outrun the other, is the graphic symbol of creation. To the Korean mind night and day, the masculine and feminine elements of nature, whence proceed all things, are here pictured in miniature. One dark blue and the other reddish or yellow, represent heaven, or the male element, and the earth, the female element or great mother. Across the ocean the heavens seem to clasp the earth, while the land rises up in lofty mountains to hold the heavens in its embrace, thus making harmony, beauty, and the eternal fitness of things.

On oriental art one will recognize these symbols, discernible in the teacup, in a thousand decorative forms; but the Koreans were the first to make of them a national flag. The Japanese add a third, making a threefold symbol, which to them represents Heaven, Earth, and Man, thus introducing the offspring of the cosmic pair. Not only do they stamp, etch, embroider, lacquer, and carve the emblem on every sort of plastic material, but notably do they mold it in the clay of the end tile or finial of their houses, thus tipping with a celestial emblem the rooftree of the family. In their manifold mysticism, this ceramic ornament points to the great universe home, in which Heaven is the father, Earth the mother, and Man the child, whose happiness consists in loyalty and obedience to the great parents. Yet all these come out of a teacup and from the last mouthful of the liquid. Verily ends meet!

Though we are inclined to associate both China and tea with the beginning of the universe, yet the Chinese went a long time without a sip of bohea. Nowhere in their voluminous literature is any mention of the shrub's leaves used as an infusion, until A. D. 350. Nowadays as many countries claim the birthplace of the *Thea Sinensis* as did Greek cities that of Homer. Assam, however, seems to have been its first home. Though usually the height of a yardstick, the tea plant may be grown so as to become a tree eighteen feet in altitude. Botanically it is the "Queen of the Camellias"; for the pearl white tearose and the blood red flower named after the German missionary, Kamel, are near relatives. The two plants dress so nearly alike that their leaves are the same in color, gloss, and form.

It is certain that tea was not generally drunk in China until the eighth century. In Japan it was introduced in A. D. 805, by the famous Buddhist saint Dengyo. This pilgrim beyond seas, who had talked with Nestorian Christians in China and sat under the teachings of the most famous sages from India, introduced a new sect and the rite of Buddhist baptism. While abroad he heard of a cup that worked magic. Its beverage could keep the monks awake during their midnight devotions. Evidently the average prayer meeting in that day, as well as in ours, needed tea. At any rate, it was clear that the Chinese drink tended to spirituality. So secure was its reputation for making sleepy folk brilliant at eleven P. M., that the venders of the shrub must have a patron saint. So, as in Europe Crispin is the patron of shoemakers, Hubert of hunters, and Saint Lawrence of the gridiron makers, the Japanese saint and patron of tea, and later of tobacco, is Daruma.

Now, if one travels much in Mikado-land, he will find a children's toy, very much like the wabbling "Chinaman" of our nursery days. He has no legs, but only an ample melon-shaped physical basis. This worthy, in wood also, is seen before the smoke shops, as the image of a saint, not handsome but rather grumpy looking, who meditated so long on the mysteries that his legs dropped off. To this holy gentleman, Daruma by name, who points many a moral, and adorns many a tale, is ascribed the origin of the teaplant.

Fairytale and mythology, like Dame Rumor, always supply more tongues than science, being specially affluent when records fail. So the story goes that after Daruma had spent long years in ceaseless vigils, Nature revolted. He fell asleep. On waking up, he was so angry that he cut off his peccant eyelids and flung them to the ground. Suddenly there rose up from the soil two shrubs which, when their leaves were picked and infused in hot water, held the potency of making eyelid muscles strong and keeping holy men awake at vigil time. Thus the new substance, instead of getting a name like antimony (anti-monkery or monk's bane) about which a sinister story is told, became the brethren's delight. In place of poison, as some thought it might be, it proved to be life giving.

In Japan the whole culture of the shrub seems to have been promoted by the "religious"; but it made little progress until near the close of the twelfth century. Then the Buddhist abbot, Myoe, imported new seeds from China, sowing them near Kioto and transplanting them to Uji, where to-day one sees in vastness, splendor, and poetry the triumph of cultivation. Henceforth tea drinking was the rule and fashion with the Japanese court and aristocracy. By the fifteenth century, this decoction, which began as a medicine, had grown into a beverage. It entered into the realm of poetry as one of the polite amusements, and became transfigured into a religion, of estheticism at least.

Herein lay beauty and blessing for Japan. Out of the teacup poured a great stream of refining influences. Tea came to the people after it had been associated with the sanctions of religion. It was presented with the courtesy and fine manners of the court. Henceforth the Japanese maiden, herself a dainty product of centuries, served the cheering refreshment on the daintiest of trays. Potters and painters, bronze casters and wood workers, with their decorative arts strove in rivalry to make the tea equipage a feast for the chastened eye. It was not the palate only, but the deft hand, gentle voice, and appreciative eye, that China's beverage educated. "Teaism" became a school of manners and a gift of art. It was a new element in a civilization already rich.

Yet, as if to knock to flinders our ridiculous notion that the Japanese are an old nation, can we believe that tea drinking, as a national custom in Nippon, does not antedate the same thing in England, and indeed is hardly older than the great Boston Tea Party? Yet it is so. Although tea ritual, or the esthetic ceremonies of *cha no yu*, became virtually a national institution by the end of the seventeenth century, the general use of tea among the lower classes was not known until about A. D. 1700. Even in modern Korea tea is not a universal beverage. Nothing surprised me more in Japan, in 1870, than to see hot water drunk almost as often as tea and only the cheapest kind of *cha* drunk by the laborers.

The Orient's gift of tea to Europe may have been welcomed without much opposition; but in America the infusion won its way to our tables only after hard names and hostile criticism. Listen to Captain Bernard Romans, who wrote a history of Florida and built our first forts at West Point:

"Tea, a despicable weed and of late attempted to be made a dirty conduit to lead a stream of oppressions into these happy regions!" Let us hope that the Captain was referring to the unusual method of drawing tea, with the aid of cold salt water, in Boston Harbor. Tea, he says further, is "one of the greatest causes of the poverty which seems for some years past to have preyed on the vitals of Britain, and it would not have deserved my attention had it not so universally become a necessary of life." Of course, whatever is "a necessary of life" is taxable. Hence King George's folly! He inveighs against "this vile article of luxury." He quite outdoes the sand-lots oratory in hinting that the Chinese are gleeful in thus enticing the Occidentals to send their gold and silver to China, in return for the "abominable stuff." Nevertheless, Captain Romans urges the cultivation of tea in Florida to head off the designs of Great Britain.

Even as late as 1819, our great Simeon DeWitt, who was on the staff of Washington, a scientific man, and Surveyor General of the State of New York, "has no tea in him," as the Japanese say. He reviles the foreign luxury, which in his view degrades the constitutional stamina of the American people. "Happy for us would it be if such a time should return, when tea and coffee were almost unknown in our country!" He mourns that sugar and milk must be added to "the nauseous drugs," to decoy children into the use of them.

How oblivious of chronology are those descendants of the Pilgrims who insist on publicly boasting of teapots "brought over in the Mayflower," when England knew no tea till after the Commonwealth! Some have even offered their holy crockery to the Pilgrim Museum at Plymouth, Massachusetts, for enshrinement. Happily for science and faith these mushroom growths of fancy find a place beneath the things authentic in the cellar, amid the great collection of uncertainties.

Yet there's fun in the teacup. Americans, while enjoying the humors of the case, must be grateful. Tea in Europe lifted woman up. The hot drinks introduced from the Orient gave her a place of honor at the table never enjoyed before, making the wife the president of the daily meal. How fascinating is the rosy Madonna of the steaming cups at five P. M! How stimulative to fine manners and gracious accomplishments! How it does somehow, without malice, remind of the delightful crones in fairytales or medieval forest lore, when we see old ladies with their cups of green tea held between their cap strings, dishing out gossip. Before tea came, man sat at the top of the table, along with the salt or the spicebox; now woman rules amid the silver and ceramics, and a Princess pours.

Sometimes the lady becomes despot. "I don't think the first cup from the teapot is fit to drink," blandly remarked a strong-minded English lady, in the five o'clock garden—and thereupon handed the same to her husband! I took mental notes—and the second cup—with thanks to her and pity for him.

To almost incredible lengths of care and anxiety do some of the native connoisseurs in China and Japan proceed for the securing of their tea to taste. They select the soil and seed, regulate the supply of sunlight and moisture, and provide whatever feeds the plant, using those last refinements of experimental skill which long experience has suggested. There are tea tasters who profess, and are really able, to discriminate every grade of tea; but, in the height of my own revels and niceties of perception, when living near Uji, I was never able to distinguish the merits of anything higher than tea at two dollars a pound as sold in Japan, though I have heard of tea sold at six dollars for sixteen ounces.

In my teacup I have a picture gallery of happy memories. I recall the esthetic charm of many interiors; for all Japan is keyed up to the environment of tea drinking in temperate measure and dainty style. Repose, self control, the not too much refinement, power to think and enjoy, grew with the cheering tea. Beautiful is the pearly tearose. Gentle are the ways of the tea pickers and elegant are the manners of the drinkers of the uninebriating cup. I believe in tea. "It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, inasmuch as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe. It represents the true spirit of Eastern democracy by making all its votaries aristocrats in taste."

The East and the West do not yet understand each other; but the whole world meets in brotherhood over the teacup.

The Ceremonial Serving of Tea in Japan.